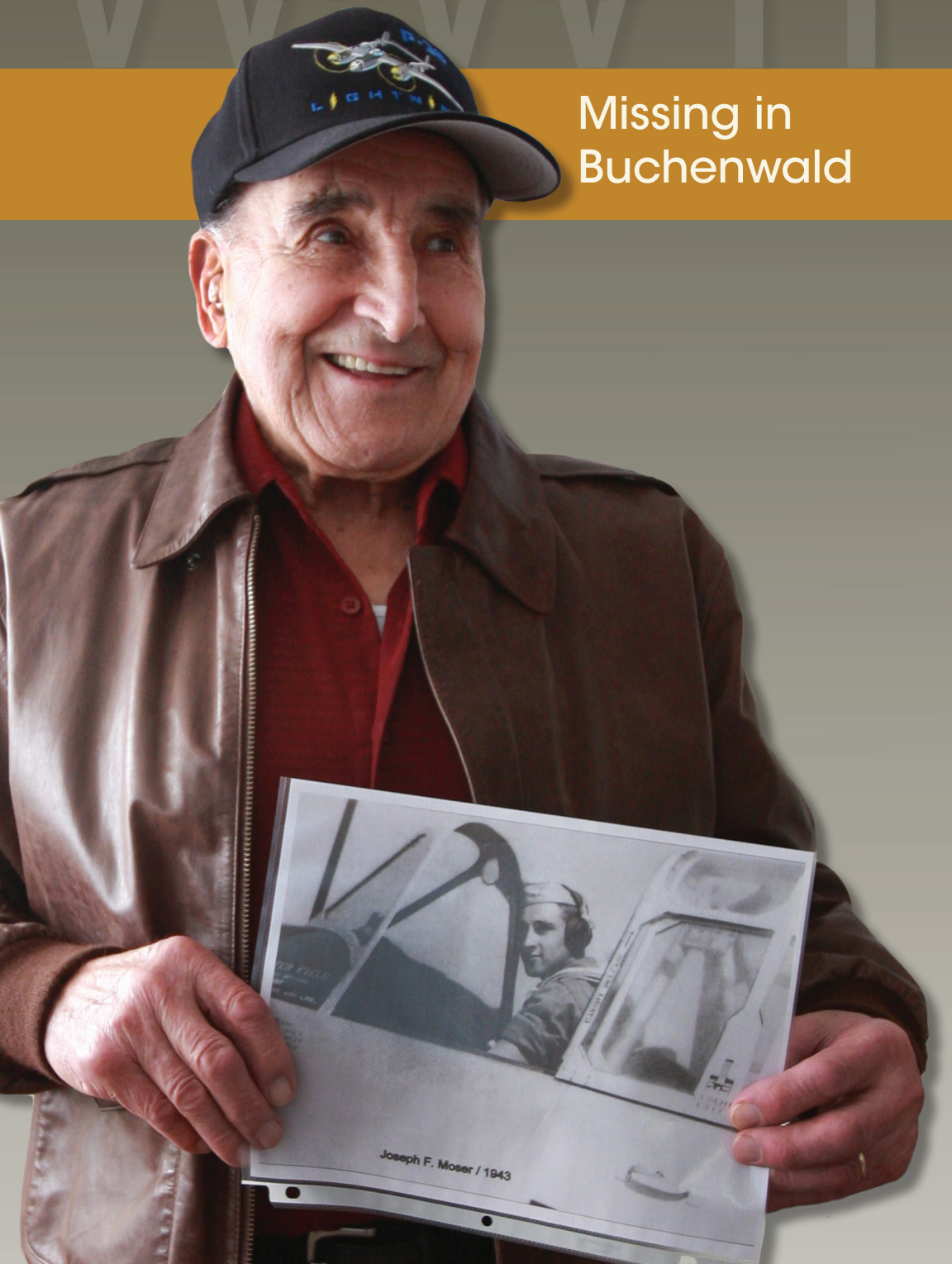
WWII

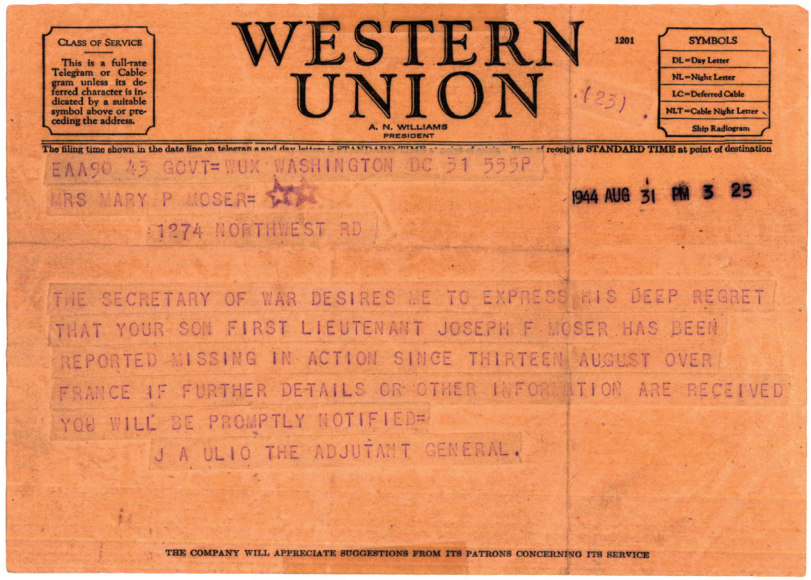
JOE MOSER

Missing in Buchenwald



There in the skies, 3,200 feet over north-central France, Joe Moser dangled beneath a twin-engine fighter. All around his aircraft fire raged, slowly consuming pieces of a boyhood dream. A window shattered. A gaping hole cut across the plane's left engine. The pilot hung upside down. The plane flew in terrifying form—inverted and damaged, barely resembling the marvel he'd once admired in a magazine. Moser locked his eyes on the twin-boom tail where plenty of pilots had met their fate. Danger never left his mind. By August 13, 1944, the day of this 44th mission, he had lost nearly a quarter of his buddies in the 429th Fighter Squadron, 9th Air Force. Approaching Dreux, France, man and aircraft continued to plunge.

Here and now, Joe Moser is 93. He steadies his model P-38 in his hands. He narrows his dark eyes and he points to the tail. "When you bail out, you have to contend with that tail," he says with a grin. Then he recalls the months that followed his precarious flight. He can show you the letters from anxious neighbors or the telegram that announced he was missing in



CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.

WESTERN UNION

1201

A. N. WILLIAMS
PRESIDENT

SYMBOLS

DL = Day Letter
NL = Night Letter
LC = Deferred Cable
NLT = Cable Night Letter
Ship Radiogram

The filing time shown in the date line on telegram and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

EAA90 45 GOVT=WUX WASHINGTON DC 31 555P

MRS MARY P MOSER=

1944 AUG 31 PM 3 25

1274 NORTHWEST RD

THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR SON FIRST LIEUTENANT JOSEPH F MOSER HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION SINCE THIRTEEN AUGUST OVER FRANCE IF FURTHER DETAILS OR OTHER INFORMATION ARE RECEIVED YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY NOTIFIED=

J A ULIO THE ADJUTANT GENERAL.

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

By way of Western Union, Mary Moser officially learns of her son's disappearance. The telegram marks the beginning of more than eight months in captivity. *Joseph Moser private collection*

action or his identification card as a prisoner of war. But it's the family photo albums—glimpses into a life well before the war—where you first find strength of character.

The Moser family on the dairy farm in Ferndale, Washington. "It was a good life, really," Moser says of his upbringing on the land he loves. *Joseph Moser private collection*

Joe Moser was just a kid on a farm in Ferndale when he began persevering in life and defying the odds. He used to split his time hunting for eggs or milking his twin cows. Sometimes, after a good rain, he'd follow the meandering Nooksack River for a mile to his grandparents' home and stomp in the waterholes. Out there on the farm, at a very young age, Joe Moser acquired the grit to fork hay and the resilience to overcome sorrow.

Joseph Moser Sr. emigrated from Switzerland to build a life in America. His strong work ethic inspires his son long after his death. *Joseph Moser private collection*

He was only 6 in 1927 when his younger sister Josephine toddled over to a trough with apples and drowned. Unexpected tragedy returned in the summer of 1936. Joe's father contracted pneumonia and his body quit fighting after a week. Joe never forgot watching him struggle the day he died, as Joseph Moser Sr. walked from the house to the barn. The elder Moser, a sturdy man with a bushy mustache and a briar pipe, emigrated from Switzerland to make something of himself in America. There wasn't enough work in his

native land for all seven kids. The hard-working dairy farmer, who married a handsome woman from New Zealand and built a life in Ferndale, died suddenly at 53. Joe isn't sure how the family survived under the weight of all that grief. But the Mosers pulled together in hard times the way families do. Joe shouldered immense responsibility in the absence of his mentor and namesake. Mary Moser, a widow at 31, stood faithfully by her children and their dreams.

"It was just something I dreamed I wanted to do," Moser says of his dream to fly the Lockheed P-38 Lightning. Dubbed the "Fork-Tailed Devil" by the Germans, the twin-eingine fighter flew over Europe, North Africa and the Pacific. *United States Air Force photo*

In 1939, Joe Moser dreamed of flying one of the fastest fighters on the planet. He was a senior in high school when he thumbed through an airplane magazine and saw a picture of the Lockheed P-38 Lightning. The coveted fighter with a menacing nose could reach speeds in excess of 400 miles per hour. The German Luftwaffe dubbed the P-38 "der gabelschwanz-teufel" or the fork-tailed devil because of the aircraft's horizontal stabilizer and twin booms with vertical rudders. "Oh, gee, I just fell in love with it," Moser says. "I wanted to fly it. But you had to have two years college education. We couldn't afford me going to school because I was running the farm for mother, so I kind of put it off."

Joe's dream was left unanswered until a few weeks before Christmas in 1941. He was out cleaning the barn after breakfast when news broke over the radio that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Everything changed for the country and for Joe on "a date which will live in infamy." President Roosevelt declared a state of war between the United States and the Japanese Empire, and college requirements for the U.S.

Army Air Corps relaxed. Moser could be inducted if he passed a special exam. He was initially told he failed, but his test had been mismarked. Joe Moser was officially welcomed into the AAC on May 18, 1941. "Oh man, my dreams were coming true," he remembers.

Joe Moser is inducted into the U.S. Army Air Corps. *Joseph Moser private collection*

Moser's big plans unraveled quickly, however, during his 44th mission, about two miles north of Dreux, France. Moser was on a strafing run with orders to attack anything that moved when he spied a truck convoy. He flew at just 200 feet with his heart pounding, when a 37-millimeter shell pierced his left engine. Flames erupted. He shut the left engine off hoping the airstream would kill the fire, but the blaze persisted. A window broke. Shards of glass flew underneath his flight suit. Flames began licking at his elbows.

Moser had one option—to bail out and let it go, a particularly dangerous maneuver at lower speeds in a P-38. He inverted the plane and desperately tried to shake himself free. But the toe of Moser's left boot caught on the canopy. Moser's dream to fly was turned upside down, hanging precipitously, like him, from his coveted aircraft. He descended toward the earth attached to the plane he loved.

The toe of Moser's boot finally broke free and the tail dropped away from view. Free falling, Moser raced for the surface of the earth at 400 miles per hour before he pulled the ripcord. The chute opened and stopped him with a lurch. The P-38 exploded beneath him, near a stone farmhouse in the French countryside. Moser landed a second later and watched the smoke rise from a mass of wreckage dangerously close to the home. He quickly stripped himself of anything that might

give him away to the enemy, like his parachute or his helmet. French farmers greeted him and thanked him for fighting in the war. Two young boys took him off to the woods to shield him. All too soon, however, they found themselves exposed and staring into rifles.

Escorted to Marchefroy in northern France, Moser was interrogated by the Gestapo. His training took over. Regardless of the question presented by the interrogating officer, Moser repeated: "Joseph Frank Moser, First Lieutenant, United States Air Corps, 0755999. Joseph Frank Moser, First Lieutenant, United States Air Corps, 0755999." He was led next to a dark wine cellar and tossed inside. A truck backed against the wooden door to block his getaway. Joe started digging for his life with a garden hoe. But he was forced to cover his tracks when the truck moved and two more prisoners, French farmers who'd emerged in the aftermath of the crash, were thrown into the cellar.

Moser was transported to a cell at Fresnes Prison that had held political prisoners since the beginning of the German occupation of France. There, just outside Paris, Moser sat alone in his cell pondering his fate. Within two days, Moser and 167 other airmen were branded "terrorfliegers" (terror fliers) and loaded into cattle cars like animals with the other prisoners. It was pandemonium. Ironically, Paris was liberated just days later.

The German SS (Schutzstaffel), the officers who controlled the camp system, jammed nearly 100 prisoners into a single car. Each was equipped with only two 4x18 slats for ventilation. They made an unbearable journey, witnessing a 17-year-old boy dare to stick his arm outside the railcar and pay first with his hand and then with his life.

Buchenwald Concentration Camp

On slopes of the Ettersberg in north-central Germany, guards and dogs appeared on a wooded hill when the prisoners arrived by train. Moser assumed he would be held captive at a POW camp. What he discovered was a kind of surreal inhumanity.

It was August 20, 1944, and the scene of prominent and mass killings. Buchenwald concentration camp, one of the largest on German soil, was surrounded by a barbed wire fence and sentries equipped with machine guns. There were prisoner barracks to the north, SS quarters to the south, working factories and a stone quarry. Buchenwald was a haunting place where people were mistreated, starved and executed. On Hitler's orders, the SS here murdered Ernst Thalmann just two days before the airmen's arrival. Thalmann was leader of the Communist Party during the Weimar Republic, the government of Germany between the wars. He was captured during a mass arrest of communists in 1933 and spent the next 11 years in solitary confinement.

It was the other killings that would silence Moser for years after the war. And there was evidence of them everywhere. There was a crematorium, just to the right of the gatehouse as you entered, and a death room below with hooks on the wall. A chimney spewed smoke and a searing odor wafted through the air.

The eerie images of the camp and the pungent smell didn't stay with Moser like the poignant faces he saw. Political

Moser, a devout Catholic, prays daily while in confinement: "I questioned why—how could this happen. But I was never angry." *Doug Richter-Bisson photo*

Stripped of their clothes and belongings, the interred are given uniforms. The lucky wear shoes. "You're a prisoner," Moser says. "Your life is not your own." *Margaret Bourke-White/Time & Life Pictures*

captives and slave laborers—people from 30 nations—appeared dazed and vacant, as if no one lived inside. There were thousands of them—11,000 in 1939 and 86,000 by 1945. (The population at Buchenwald concentration camp has grown since Kristallnacht. During the "night of broken glass," Nazis burned hundreds of synagogues and destroyed thousands of businesses before rounding up the Jews.) The interred may have been Jewish, or Jehovah's Witnesses or unemployed or prisoners of war or Roma and Sinti (Gypsies). Their bodies were reduced to skin and bones. Their shapeless figures were covered in gray, tattered clothing bearing identification numbers and badges. The lucky prisoners wore shoes.

Moser, an airman who by rights under the Geneva Convention should have been held at a prisoner of war camp, was ordered inside. A guard informed a prisoner in their group that no one leaves Buchenwald, except through the chimney. Moser learned that so many died behind the barbed-wire fence that the brick ovens couldn't keep up. They shot people in the stables or hanged them in the crematorium. "I was so close to being killed," Moser says. "It's just so unbelievable."

Almost 100,000 people were admitted to Buchenwald in 1944, the year Moser arrived, and more than 8,600 died, without a goodbye to family or proper burial. The act of mass killings was routine, an ordinary step at the end of an assembly line. The months Joe was held captive, 742 people disappeared

in August, another 497 in September, another 732 in October. By the time operations at Buchenwald ceased, some 240,000 prisoners had been incarcerated here and 43,000 had died.

Buchenwald prisoners live on a diet of cabbage soup with worms and foul bread. "Lots of people were just skin and bones," Moser remembers. *Margaret Bourke-White/Time & Life Pictures*

Inside the camp, Moser experienced the cruel existence of the living and near dead. He suddenly had no name, no family and no home. His dreams—burned away someplace over north-central France—were never born. It was as if Joe Moser, the farm boy who dreamed of sitting in the cockpit of the P-38, never existed. Moser lost his identity when they stole his clothing, and his dignity when they brusquely shaved him from head to toe with a dull razor and clippers. He was treated like an animal. He showered without warm water or soap, and his raw skin stung after guards applied disinfectant with a rough brush.

The wooden barracks at Buchenwald were full, forcing Moser to spend his first two weeks in the camp sleeping on rocky ground and sharing a blanket with three other men. He was thankful for the warmth of August. He dreamed of fried cornmeal cakes, a Swiss dish, but he stomached cabbage soup with worms and foul bread. The food began to taste good, eventually. The toilet—a makeshift community basin of filth—never improved.

Moser feared for his life on day four. The Eighth Air Force bombed a German facility adjacent to the camp that

made parts for V-2 rockets used to target civilians in Europe. The airmen spotted a squadron of B-17s overhead. One of them yelled, "They're going to bomb this place!" But there was no place to go. The airmen crouched down. The bombs destroyed the munitions factory and some of the SS living quarters. Hundreds perished in the assault when SS guards refused to allow prisoners working in the factory to take cover.

"After the raid, the 168 of us Allied fliers that were there ... were told to go to a certain spot, a prison camp there. We got there and there was a machine gun set up. We all thought that they were going to kill us ... for what the Air Force did. But then we were told to fight fires. Maybe half of us had shoes; I wasn't one of them. We were told to go into these buildings that were burning and haul out something, whatever was available." Moser pretended to cooperate but hauled the same equipment in and out of a burning building.

Joe Moser was finally placed in barracks. Approximately 900 young kids were housed in nearby quarters. He and the other airmen later learned that the children—labeled Gypsies and more—were "disposed of." "That's one of the things that hurts me," Moser says, "to see so many children that didn't make it. That you wanted to help, but you couldn't."

The calendar changed from August to September, and September to October. Moser made a conscious decision to live. He longed to see his mother again and he thought often of his late father. He ate the dehydrated cabbage, used scraps of his extra-large shirt at the toilet and he prayed. Every day Moser, a devout Catholic, talked to God: "Why? Help me get through this!" Never once did Moser ask, "Why me?"

For all his spirit and determination to live, Moser grew weaker. He dropped 35 pounds in two months. "Myself, I'd figured that another month or two and I would be one of those corpses. Every day the wagon would go and pick up dead people, where they just fell and died. So you had that feeling. It was going to happen to you. You were hungry, oh, so hungry. Even the worm-filled cabbage soup, it just didn't bother you anymore. You ate it because it was—it kept you alive, for a while anyway."

But the airmen at Buchenwald didn't have much time. They began to hear rumors and their ranking officer, a much-respected New Zealander named Phil Lamason, had learned their fate. "We were scheduled to be executed on October 24," remembers Moser.

The Liberator

There's a code between airmen, a comradery and a shared respect that transcends battle lines, even in worldwide conflict. Stories of the airmen had crossed the desk of Hannes Trautloft, a German ace fighter who fought in the Spanish Civil War and commanded a German fighter squadron in World War II. Trautloft was inspector of day fighters when he heard that Allied airmen were imprisoned and under brutal treatment at Buchenwald. Trautloft requested a camp tour under the pretense of checking out nearby bomb damage. The German SS told him that the camp housed political prisoners who worked in the factories. Trautloft was winding up his tour when a German-speaking airman called out to him and explained that he was one of more than 160 airmen unlawfully imprisoned at the concentration camp.

Hannes Trautloft, the respected German airman who liberated Moser and more than 160 pilots from the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Within days of Trautloft's initial visit, the airmen were ushered into a building and given their original clothing. Moser was then handed his ankle-length flight boots—even the left shoe with the missing toe. Heinrich Himmler, Reich leader of the German SS, was reportedly

so angry about the airmen's release from Buchenwald that he threw a wine glass against the wall.

Later, when the airmen arrived at a POW camp, the interrogating officer believed the information they revealed about their time at Buchenwald is critical for future trials of war crimes. He reputedly hid four pages of notes in the lining of his coat.

Stalag Luft III

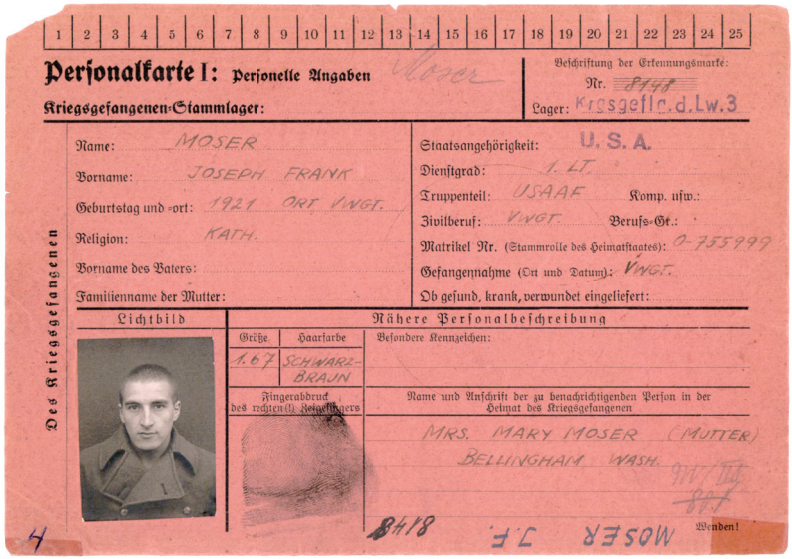
Within days of their scheduled execution, the airmen were freed. They were sent back to boxcars and on to Stalag Luft III, a POW camp in Poland approximately 100 miles southeast of Berlin. Moser weighed 113 pounds. Stalag Luft III housed Allied airmen captured during the war and later spawned The Great Escape starring Steve McQueen. The film chronicled the breakout of Allied POWs who tunneled their way to freedom. "I was put in that same barracks where that tunnel had started," Moser recalls.

For Moser, if Buchenwald was the dark of night, then Stalag Luft III was the light of day. Some modicum of life had returned at the POW camp. They bathed regularly, slept in straw beds and ate from large Red Cross parcels. "We got into a room with two American fliers and four Polish fliers. Each room cooked their own meals. ... We got our meat from our Red Cross parcels. We got corned beef and cabbage, sauerkraut and wieners, Spam."

The Death March

"Raus! Raus!" The order to get out came on January 27, 1945, as the snow fell. Russian forces were advancing across Poland, triggering the Germans to move the prisoners out of POW camps and across rough terrain despite a bruising cold. Many would march until their deaths in one of Europe's coldest winters of the 20th century.

Some of the walkers slathered their faces with margarine to protect the skin from the chill. Joe Moser, thinner



Moser's identification card as a prisoner of war. *Joseph Moser private collection*

and weaker, wore everything he had—pants, a shirt, a coat and shoddy gloves. His footprints froze as he pulled a sled two feet long. "We had a little wagon the first couple of days," Moser remembers. "Then, that got too heavy to pull anymore. So we abandoned the wagon. So then we just bundled what food we had in extra clothes."

The prisoners figured they walked 21 miles the first day, and 15 or 16 the next. With every excruciating step, they could hear the German warning: anyone who fails to keep pace will be shot. For the first time since his capture, Moser was about to give up.

As they walked, some prisoners dropped off and huddled in the snow banks. The walkers still pressing on behind them stopped. They slapped their faces and steadied them on their feet. "There were times when the people following long behind would pick up those people and help them," Moser recalls. "And then there were other times when nobody would help. They couldn't anymore. To see fellow walkers just collapse, and most of them that collapsed died right there. I don't know what it was but I just didn't want to die yet."

Other marchers lost all hope and summoned the chaplain. Recalled one Brit of discovering a man: "I found [him] on his back in the snow. He insisted on giving me what remained of his scanty rations. I stayed with him till he died, closed his eyes and ran to catch up with the main column, three miles away. The summons came again and again."

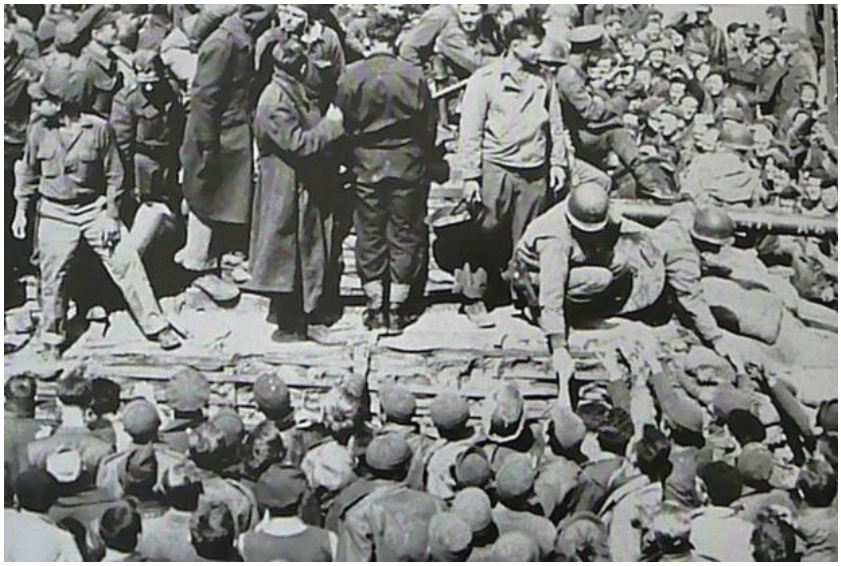
The unbearable walk eventually became too much for Moser, who passed out. Two American pilots pulling a sled hoisted him up and carried him, unconscious, for a quarter-mile. "I remember waking up in bed. I was halfway warm. We had been walking, I don't know, 40 or 50 miles." Moser found himself in a makeshift hospital in a village called Bad Muskau, on the current border between Germany and Poland. He realized he could have been left for dead along a country road in Poland.

"I started walking again and we walked 65 miles in five days to a town called Spremberg. [They] put us in boxcars again and then I went to a prisoner of war camp in Nuremberg, Germany. ... I was in Nuremberg for just about two months. ... Then, the American army got close so they marched us out of Nuremberg and we went south to Moosburg."

Out of Captivity

It was April 1945. Joe Moser was living in filth at Stalag VII/A near Moosburg, an ancient city in southern Germany where he'd been confined for a couple of weeks. He slept in overcrowded tents, in a camp built for 10,000 POWs that held some 80,000 people. Moser and 15,000 POWs had just completed a 70-mile march from Nuremberg, the site of their last POW camp. During their long journey, a farmer told the passing men of President Roosevelt's death from a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

The sloppy weather at Moosburg began to warm. The war was ending. Allied forces were coming. After a fierce battle, the Allies captured the town of Moosburg. "I was right close to the gate when a big American tank came and run right over the gate. Come in and they took down the German flag and



"I think we all just cried. ... No feeling like it, really." Joe Moser on the day of liberation, April 29, 1945.

raised the American flag. You're a prisoner. Your life isn't your own. And all of a sudden, you're free. The joy is tremendous. It's something that is hard to describe because we're a free nation; we can do just about whatever we want. And to have all of that taken away. And to have all of that given back to you. I think we all just cried. ... No feeling like it, really."

After the war, Joe Moser was reunited with his mother, Mary. "We had walked down by Tacoma when I first saw her.

She had drove up in her car and I was walking. She got out of the car and I saw her for the first time. I think I bawled like a baby."


VICTORY EXTRA!

NAZIS QUIT!

CITY EDITION EXTRA The Seattle Daily Times

TERMS SIGNED 5:41 SUNDAY, SEATTLE TIME

U. S. PLANES BAG 52 MORE JAP VESSELS

Yanks, Russ Bearing Down On Prague As Nazis Resist

GREATEST OF ALL WARS IN EUROPE ENDS

BULLETINS

SURRENDER TOLD PEOPLE OF GERMANY

Moser gave up his career as a fighter

pilot. He married, raised five kids and kept up his faith in the Catholic Church. He became an avid Seattle Seahawks fan. Moser earned his living repairing furnaces, quietly exchanging pleasantries with neighbors. They knew nothing of his past as a fighter pilot. Moser tried to open up about the war. But like the American officers who'd balked at his claims when he applied for his discharge papers —"No Americans were there!" they'd accused—people in his own community also doubted his assertions. "I don't believe a word he said," a gentleman said after Moser spoke at a community Lions Club. The hurtful response silenced Moser for decades. "So many didn't believe it, and that's in the back of my mind. So many people didn't believe a person could be treated that way."

Then, in the 1980s, a reporter at a POW support group meeting wrote a story about Joe, breaking through the wall of silence. It was the first time his family learned the truth. His children understand why, more than ever, the story of their father, now in his nineties, must live on. They collect all they can—pictures, war documents, newspaper articles and stories. They urge their father to speak up, especially around young people. "Kids don't know," says daughter Jaleen Bacon. They don't know how cruel people can be. It's not in the history books."

Joe Moser reaches for his beloved P-38.
Joseph Moser private collection

The nightmares have stopped and Moser has found peace. He harbors no ill will, not even toward his captors.

He is especially grateful to three men, Hannes Trautloft, the German ace fighter who helped liberate the Buchenwald airmen, and his fellow marchers who trudged through the snowy cold and carried him to safety. His deepest regret is that he doesn't know their names. "If they hadn't carried me," he says shaking his head. "Over the years, I've thought of those guys so many times. I've blessed them many times. What I wished all my life, really, is that I could remember their names."

Often, Joe Moser returns to August 13, 1944, the day he dangled from the prized aircraft, a young man with big dreams gone astray. But in a moment he is back in Ferndale and grateful for the life he's lived. "I've had a wonderful life. ... I would go through it again to keep our freedom, really. ... I know I could be angry for what I had to go through, but it made life worth living."

Trova Heffernan for The Legacy Project